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ABSTRACT

As a starting point in exploring issues of how texts and discourses are affiliated with differing kinds and levels of cultural capital and social power in institutional contexts, this paper considers the experiences of the Hartford (Connecticut) school district to provide definitions of literacy, discourse, and textuality, and their application to urban education, and to address methodology for urban reporting. The political implications of textual research for urban systems are also explored. This exploration of the institutionalizing of urban literacy focuses on discourse as it relates to social and political processes and outcomes, drawing on macrotextual analysis and viewing texts as symbolic actions or means to frame and define a situation. The frame suggested by J. Lemke (1995) of presentational, orientational, and organizational meaning can be applied to the institutionalizing of urban literacy and will be applied to writings from "The Hartford Courant" over a 3-year period. The use of this approach is illustrated through the examination of an article about the school district. When the presentational, orientational, and organizational stance of this type of urban reporting is examined, an intertextuality develops that is deeply political in nature. Public and professional debates in urban systems use systems of intertextuality or sets of preferred discourses. Urban reporting represents this intertextuality and functions as a legitimizing agency that naturalizes or disguises contributions to urban inequities. As textuality becomes a political battleground, the struggle becomes related to critical literacy, reemphasizing the need for educators to think politically about education. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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Literacy and urban legitimacy: The case of political discourse in an urban school district

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The textual, in the broadest sense of all meaning, is deeply political and serves to define power relations between communities (Lemke, 1995). Our meanings shape and are shaped by social relationships, both individually and as members of social groups. These social relationships bind us into communities, cultures and subcultures. Nowhere is this more evident than in urban school reform initiatives that provide for debates within public and professional forums. Such debates may revolve around curricular issues, back to basics vs. critical literacy or social reconstruction, school choice issues, community schools vs. vouchers, and as is the case in the Hartford Public School District, governance issues, local vs. state control. It should come as no surprise that the development of public opinion regarding urban school systems is strongly influenced, if not actually formed, by the rhetorical and linguistic norms that govern these debates.

The Hartford Courant (November 6, 1997) recently published an article on the Hartford Public School District entitled "A Sobering Report Card: Long-Term Problems in City Schools." Six months prior to the article, the state legislature took an unprecedented step in urban education by removing Hartford's locally elected school board and replacing it with a State Department of Education appointed board of trustees. The State Department promised to provide "routine report cards" on district progress, the first of which has been issued and was reported on by the *Courant* in the above-mentioned article. What follows is an excerpt:

> The State Department of Education issued an optimistic report card on the progress of the takeover of the Hartford Schools, tempered with a sobering assessment of the district's continued problems. The evaluation - the first in what will be quarterly checkups - emphasized the "new hope and optimism" that the state says now reigns in Hartford. The report highlighted the positive feelings and incremental progress of the state-appointed board of trustees. But it also collected and summarized persistently grim statistics about test scores, bloated budgets, intense poverty and management problems...More chronic problems also persist,

> such as high student mobility, where students transfer numerous times from one school to another; excessive promotion of students in elementary and middle schools when they are failing; pervasive below-grade level reading scores; few alternative programs for disruptive students; poor parent participation; inadequate school security; alarmingly high dropout rates.

The article concludes by reporting:

> Hartford (as compared to the two other largest urban districts in the state, New Haven and Bridgeport) has the highest percentage of students receiving welfare benefits and speaking languages other than English in the home, and the lowest percentage of kindergartners who have attended preschool. Family wealth, fluency in English, and preschool training are considered crucial in predicting school success.

There is little question that the shaping of literacy is at the heart of the educational enterprise and serves as the primary vehicle for the construction of professional and public discourse. According to research on literacy and constructivism, knowledge construction is as much about institutionalizing discourse as it is about evidential inquiry (Greene & Ackerman, 1995). In an essay entitled "Making Trouble," Lemke (1995), proposed that within the field of education:

> "...meaning is a much more fundamental notion than truth, indeed more fundamental even than the notion of "reality" itself. The basic argument [of the essay] was that claims about truth or reality are meanings made by people according to patterns that they have learned, and that trying to understand how and why people make the meanings they do is more useful than fighting over the truth of their claims" (p. 156).

Clearly this perspective can be applied to what we have termed the institutionalizing of urban literacy. Urban discourse takes place in times of "fast capitalism" (Agger, 1991). Furthermore, according to Luke (1995) "Life in fast capitalist societies is a text-saturated

matter" (p. 13). Texts are rapidly dispersed into the texture of urban life in such a way that they are not critically read by those living either in or outside the urban center, but rather as received fact. "In fast capitalism the boundary between text and world has been blurred to such an extent that it is nearly impossible to identify where text leaves off and world begins" (Agger, 1991, p. 2). Agger calls this the "secret power" of textuality, in that "texts write our lives without the apparent mediation of authoriality" (p. 2).

This lack of authoriality can be found in urban reporting. By employing the constructs embedded in textual theory (Gracia 1995; Lemke, 1995), and discourse analysis (Gee, et al. 1992; Luke, 1995) this paper presents a preliminary framework to uncover how journalistic writing contributes to a language of pathology, labeling urban districts in general and the Hartford School System in particular as "at risk."

A broad examination of literacy and urban school reform has been conducted from a curricular perspective (Carlson, 1993). Carlson's work, although examining the political underpinnings of urban school reform, stops short in considering the "social meaning making" which resides in the discourse of urban school reform. Little research exists which examines the textuality of urban reporting from the perspective of discourse analysis. Such a perspective is crucial in that as we've witnessed the Hartford Public School district undergo massive change, moving first from control by an elected school board to a joint coordination of the board and a private for profit corporation (E.A.I.), and finally to the ascendancy of the Connecticut State Department of Education. Because of these shifts, it is our contention that a language of maladjustment has evolved, identifying children and families and employees of the Hartford Public School District as deficient and dysfunctional (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). These recent changes to an urban system, as well as the new scholarship in textuality (Aggers, 1991; Garcia, 1995; Lemke, 1995) provided the impetus for this paper and our broader investigation into the institutionalizing of urban discourse.

Another powerful concern for Peter, a research methodologist and educational psychologist and myself, an urban curriculum specialist, lies in our joint effort to answer Michael Apple's (1995) call for forms of "inquiry that might enable educational researchers to better deal-both methodologically and ethically/politically-with issues of mutuality, caring and social justice" (p. xvii). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) state that such inquiry will represent a means by which literacies can be interrogated and made available "for understanding and disclosing the technologies of the self, that produce us [as compositions of our meaning making] within the natural, self-evident condition of everyday discourse" (p. 51).

Although work in critical discourse analysis is a recent interdisciplinary blending of subject fields, there are substantial areas for theoretical, methodological, and empirical investigation (Luke, 1995) which can examine:

> "How texts and discourses are affiliated with differing kinds and levels of cultural capital and social power in institutional contexts: If power is situated and relational as Gore (1993) suggests, then critical discourse analysis needs to theorize and document the sociological conditions of textual production and interpretation. This would require an analysis of "linguistic markets," social fields, and the contingency of cultural capital on the availability of other forms of social, economic, and symbolic capital" (Luke, 1995, p. 40).

As a preliminary embarkation point in addressing the above issue, this paper will provide the following information: (1) definitions of literacy, discourse, and textuality and their application to urban education; (2) methodology for examining urban reporting; (3) and the political implications of textual research for urban systems.

Definitional Statements

Literacy has been identified as a current "buzzword" and dealing with literacy is one way of "getting relevant" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). This paper will employ the definition used by Lankshear and McLaren who report that, due to the term's popularity in

educational circles, academics "are faced with the reality of multiple literacies which can be distinguished from one another and classified according to a range of purposes. One such purpose is to classify literacies in terms of their politics" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xviii). By evoking the term critical literacy, the concern becomes the extent to which, and the ways in which, actual and possible social practices of reading disempower individuals to understand and/or engage in the politics of urban life (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Giroux (1993) claims that literacy "in its varied versions is about the practice of representation as a means of organizing, inscribing, and continuing meaning (p.10). For the purposes of this paper, literacy is also about practices of representation that reinforce existing textual systems.

> Our interest resides in the specificity of the means by which the "new times" have produced new economies of subjectivity and new regimes of desire through a proliferation of new literacies. If literacies largely inform how we read the world and the word, but also how such a reading produces who we are...then we need to explore the changing relationship between literacy and culture in the era of "new times" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 4).

Clearly, as structural changes are being instituted and re/instituted upon the Hartford Public School District, it follows that the journalistically constructed literacy created by the press neutralizes the change process, while castigating those connected with the district. As quoted from the article, "The State Department of Education issued an optimistic report card on the progress of the takeover of the Hartford Schools, tempered with a sobering assessment of the district's continued problems." Indeed, the article continues, citing the problems of Hartford Public Schools as "chronic." Phrases such as "chronic problems" and "at risk" systems form what we consider to be a discourse of urban pathology (Swadener, 1995). Furthermore, as Winborn (1991; cited in Swadener, 1995) asserts, the use of medical terminology, as applied to educational issues, alludes to both the threat and to the persistence of diseased states.

A possible explanation for the application of medical language to the formation of urban literacy may lie in the assumption that by employing a discourse of science to educational change, readers are led to conclude that the world "is" in some sense, objective (Lemke, 1995). Another possible explanation may be contained in Luke's (1995) definition of critical discourse analysis:

> Discourse in institutional life can be viewed as a means for the naturalization and disguise of power relations that tied to inequalities in the social production and distribution of symbolic and material resources. This means that dominant discourses in contemporary society tend to represent those social formations and power relations that are the products of history, social formation and culture...as if they were the product of organic, biological and essential necessity. By this account, critical discourse analysis is a political act itself, an intervention in the apparently natural flow of talk and text in institutional life that attempts to "interrupt" everyday common sense (Luke, 1995, p. 12).

Texts are among the most common objects of human experience (Garcia, 1995). Individuals rely upon texts in that they "constitute the means by which knowledge and information are communicated and stored" (Gracia. 1995, p. iii). Questions related to literacy are concerned with "interpretation, authorship, and the role that audiences play in the determination of the meaning and function of texts" (p.iii). A theory of textuality rests upon two conceptual underpinnings: (1) a conception of the nature of texts and (2) a particular understanding of the function of texts. Gracia (1995) defines texts as groups of entities, used as signs, that are selected, arranged, and intended to convey some specific meaning to an audience. Lemke (1995) concludes that text semantics deal specifically with patterns of continuity and change. From texts we develop three simultaneous kinds of meaning:

> *Presentational*: - the construction of how things are in the natural and social worlds by their explicit description as participants, processes, relations and circumstances,

standing in particular semantic relations to one another across meaningful stretches of text, and from text to text;

Orientational: - the construction of our orientational stance toward present and potential addressees and audiences, and toward the presentational content of our discourse, in respect of social relations and evaluations from a particular view point, across meaningful stretches of text and from text to text;

Organizational: - the construction of relations between elements of the discourse itself, so that it is interpretable as having structure, texture, and informational organization and relative prominence across meaningful stretches of text and from text to text [also called intertextuality] (Lemke, 1995 p. 41).

Methodological Issues

Broadly stated, "the study of discourse reflects human experience and, at the same time, constitutes important parts of that experience. Thus, discourse analysis may be concerned with any part of human experience touched on or constituted by discourse. Due to this complexity and holism, studies in discourse analysis can be directed in a variety of disciplines with different research traditions, with no overarching theory common to all types (Gee et al., 1992, p. 229). Despite this methodological diversity, the question facing educational researchers, is not whether discourse analysis is a viable and contributing element of contemporary educational study. Rather, the question is what is to count as discourse analysis in educational research (Luke, 1995)?

Our research on the institutionalizing of urban literacy focuses on discourse as it relates to social and political processes and outcomes. Such an approach draws on macrotextual analysis which illuminates "the verbalization and representation of society and groups through words...This approach views texts as symbolic actions, or means to frame a situation, define it, grant it meaning, and mobilize appropriate responses to it...In this sense the macrotextual sees society as a "speaker" and social signs, including words as

texts (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 465). The meaning of text flows from both the combination of words and from the structural organization (Gee, et al. 1995).

We intend to utilize Lemke's (1995) framework of presentational, orientational, and organizational meaning, to examine the institutionalizing of urban literacy. Through the examination of journalistic writings from *The Hartford Courant* over a three year period, we will analyze the presentational stance of the writing, specifically the construction and description of the Hartford Public School System across meaningful stretches of text, and from text to text. The orientational meaning of the text will be examined through the lens of social relations. Evaluations of the district and the organizational stance will be examined by considering the construction of relations between elements of the discourse itself. To provide an example of how we will employ this analysis, we will utilize the article introduced at the beginning of the text.

The presentational analysis clearly indicates how things are inside and outside the social world of the Hartford Public School system as compared to other urban districts in Connecticut. The following passage, taken from the conclusion of the article in the *Courant*, had this to report:

> Hartford (as compared to the two other largest urban districts in the state, New Haven and Bridgeport) has the highest percentage of students receiving welfare benefits and speaking languages other than English in the home, and the lowest percentage of kindergartners who have attended preschool.

The orientational meaning of the article is indicated by how the article abstracts positive stances as coming from the depersonalization of the neutral evaluation conducted by "the state."

> The evaluation - the first in what will be quarterly checkups - emphasized the "new hope and optimism" that the state says now reigns in Hartford. The report highlighted the positive feelings and incremental progress of the state-appointed board of trustees.

The organizational meaning can be construed in the relationships between elements, informational organization, and relative prominence across stretches of text. The article's title, "A Sobering Report Card: Long-Term Problems in City Schools," addresses urban systems in general, describing urban problems as "long-term." The introduction is highlighted by "the State Department of Education issuing an "optimistic" report card on the "progress" of the takeover of the Hartford Schools." However, the article concludes by stating that family wealth, fluency in English, and preschool training, are considered crucial in predicting school success. In the prior sentence, a statement was made that this was exactly what was missing in the district. Whereas, the State Department of Education is linked to optimism, the conclusion of the article reveals and reinforces Hartford's urban deficit. Although representing a single article, we have seen that the author has employed a language of pathology ("chronic problems"), depersonalized neutralized language of the "state," and an organizational stance which provides for optimistic beginnings and pessimistic endings. When one corroborates the presentational, orientational, and organizational stance of urban reporting, an intertextuality develops which is deeply political in nature.

Political Implications

The most useful principle of textual theory is the principle of intertextuality. "We are constantly reading and listening to, writing and speaking, this text in the context of and against the background of other texts and other discourses" (Lemke, 1995, p. 10). Nowhere is this more true than in the discourse of urban educational reform. Public and professional debates, located within urban systems, utilize systems of intertextuality or sets of preferred discourses. Urban reporting represents this intertextuality and functions as a legitimizing agency which naturalizes or disguises contributions to urban inequities. Journalistic reporting on urban systems, serves to get the reading public thinking along similar lines to what Lemke (1995) identifies as lines of common sense. Such an approach

views urban districts by ideological assumptions which, in turn, purports them to be both pathological and intractable.

In a postmodern era of fast capitalism, textuality may be considered a political battleground. For educators, this spurs a need to politicize textuality, thereby opening seemingly neutral texts to "public argumentation, contestation and reformulation" (Aggers, 1991). Such a struggle is directly related to critical literacy in that "we need to struggle in the domain of textual politics in order to reclaim politics as a valuable public activity...Once we identify the politics, we can work to reformulate it - We must redefine public life through textually empowering activities" (p. 13). This example of urban discourse analysis has been unapologetically political. For as Torres (1995) concludes in his analysis of "State and Education Revisited: Why Educational Researchers Should Think Politically About Education:"

> Researchers obsessed with technique, productivity and efficiency are likely to consider their work free of any political interest and independent of the state and the forces of civil society. Unfortunately, the consequences of depoliticization are not better research findings but the eventual eradication of political and moral questions from schools and public life (p. 318).

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